

## THE ORGANIZATION OF SURGERY IN FRANCE\*

MAURICE M. MERCADIER, M.D.

Chirurgien de l'Hôpital de la Pitié  
Chief Surgeon, American Hospital  
Paris, France

It is a privilege and a great honor to be your guest tonight. I wish I were able to speak good English to tell you how glad I am to be an honored Fellow of the New York Academy of Medicine, among the oldest academic bodies in this country. I would like to talk shop and tell you a few words about the organization of French surgery.

French surgery is under the control of the government by way of the Social Security Administration. Ninety-nine percent of the French population plus foreigners working in France are protected by the Social Security Administration. Twenty percent of the resources of that tremendous agency comes from the employees, 80% from the bosses. It explains part of the inflationary rise. Each year the participation of the employer becomes more and more important, and the rate of insurance increases regularly.

Surgical patients receive care in five kinds of institutions: public teaching hospitals connected with universities, public hospitals without connection with universities, private hospitals directly controlled by the Social Security Administration, private nonprofit hospitals, and private profit-making hospitals. The first three hospitals work on the prepaid principle. The last two hospitals function on the fee-for-service principle.

The Social Security Administration provides a fixed amount of money for each kind of operation: \$75 for an appendectomy, \$150 for a cholecystectomy, \$180 for a hysterectomy or a prostatectomy, \$325 for a Whipple operation, and \$450 for an important heart operation.

The charge per day for hospitalization varies between \$80 and \$120, depending on the surgical specialty. If the patient wishes to have special care he has to pay from his own an extra charge both for the surgeon and for the hospital. The extra charge from the surgeon must be reasonable, but what is meant by reasonable we do not know.

---

\*Presented at the Stated Meeting of the New York Academy of Medicine held April 13, 1978.

The advantages of such an organization are:

- 1) Everybody is certain to be taken care of.
- 2) The patient can choose the surgeon he wants and the hospital he prefers.
- 3) If he can afford it he can get special care.

The disadvantages are caused by the low fees. To make a living some corrupt physicians order unnecessary sophisticated and expensive investigations and perform unnecessary operations. For instance, a curative and preventive hernia repair, curative at the level of the actual hernia, preventive on the other side, appendectomy for what is called chronic appendicitis, and so on. The reputation of surgeons in general suffers from that kind of malpractice, which has unduly increased the cost of surgery.

Is it possible to correct such a trend? That is the question. The surgeon is at a cross-road of interests: the patient's interest and the government's interest. At the center of this dilemma is the fundamental principle of medicine embodied in the Hippocratic Oath, which binds a surgeon to do everything in his power to treat the patient. On the other hand, as it has been said, "As we, as surgeons, develop more and more practice that may be beneficial to the individual but not to the interest of the society, we risk reaching a point where marginal gains to individuals threaten the welfare of the whole."

In the extreme, the mass media consider surgery as an industry, as a source of high profits. This is not true. We must repeatedly explain that this is a false assessment. The surgeon, aware of his high stature, acts in favor of the patient. His duty is to take care of him the best way he can, but as a citizen he is aware that he should avoid a waste of money for the care of the community.

To play such a role he must be independent and free. He has to obey his conscience. He is not a representative of the administration. To play his correct role he must make his living by himself. If he accepts a salary he depends on the organization controlling the money; he must be willing to agree with the administration. He is not free anymore. That is to say that he accepts control by the government, by politics, by politicians. This is the way to socialization.

At this moment in history we must choose between the old freedom and this new concept. As a conservative, I think surgery is an art with heart. I refuse to consider surgery as a common job or as an industry. I am not a common worker, a simple employee. I practice the art of surgery to

maintain life and the quality of life. Everyone must be sure of this fundamental principle.

I shall conclude with the famous saying of Jesse Jackson to a suffering minority: "Have pride in what you are. Excel at what you do. You are somebody."

As surgeons you treat the worst and the best. You should not care about anything but the art of surgery.